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Why Munch?

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Edvard Munch, Self-Portrait with Cigarette, 1895 Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo

Why Munch? It's a deceptively simple question. Why is it that Edvard Munch, of all the Nordic artists to have worked in the 50 years that frame the beginning of the 20th century, why is it that he alone has become an internationally canonical artist? It is not as if Scandinavia failed to produce other exceptional artists during this period. Yet, unless one is Scandinavian, or is a student of late 19th-century Nordic art, one would be hard pressed, especially in the English-speaking world, to identify other important artists from the region for this period.

These days art history has grown suspicious of its own canons, seeking to spread attention to artists and art traditions marginalized within Western art history and without. In the rush to dismiss canons and canonization, however, we miss an essential truth about intellectual and commercial markets. As Marcel Duchamp reminds us, "Millions of artists create; only a few thousands are discussed or accepted by the spectator and many less again are consecrated by posterity." Duchamp also realized that "Art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist." Or, Duchamp may have added, without necessary regard to the aesthetic qualities of the art work.

Munch alone among Nordic artists belongs to those few consecrated by what I would argue is still the largely singular narrative of modernist art history. To see this narrative at work one only has to compare the number of published monographs and exhibition catalogues on the artist versus other

notable contemporaries from Scandinavia. I used the very well-resourced Getty Research library online catalog. I found almost 100 more monographs on Munch than even on one of the artists he famously influenced, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

Getty Research Institute Library holdings (distinct monographs)

Edvard Munch = 315
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner = 225
Anders Zorn = 56
Carl Milles = 14
Vilhelm Hammershøi = 14
Ernst Josephson = 10
Peder Krøyer = 8
Christian Krohg = 8
Michael Ancher = 7
Albert Edelfelt = 4
Erik Werenskiold = 4
Per Krohg = 0
Lucy Krohg = 0
Richard Bergh = 0

Given the size of this literature, we should not be surprised that Munch scholars have been very interested in exploring the evolution of the artist's reputation. For example, art historians have thoroughly documented the early attention the artist received from German art collectors and art writers. We also know that relatively early in his career, Munch benefited from extensive contacts with some of Europe's leading writers and intellectuals of the day.

And just as important for the artist's growing reputation was the

formidable frequency with which Munch exhibited his works in the years prior to the First World War. Donald Gordon's catalogue of modern art exhibitions between 1900 and 1916 provides a useful, if not exhaustive, index of Munch's exhibition activities. He ranks 16th on this list, which of course excludes his

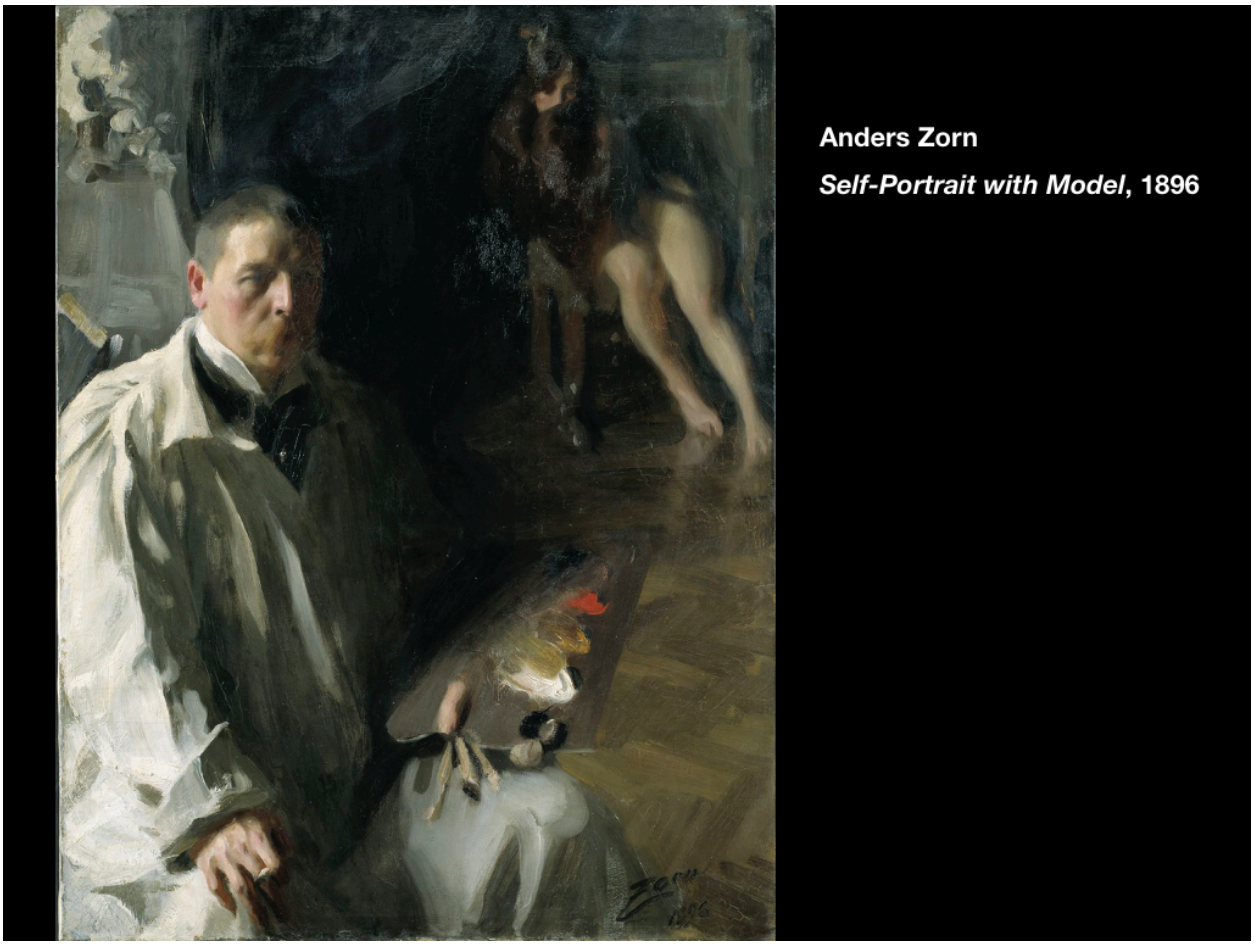
Rank	Artist	# of shows	# of cities
1	Vasily Kandinsky	92	30
2	Edouard Vuillard	91	29
3	Pierre Bonnard	89	24
4	Henri Matisse	87	26
5	Maurice Denis	82	25
6	Auguste Renoir	78	28
7	Vincent van Gogh	77	28
8	Henri Manguin	77	23
9	Felix Vallotton	72	23
10	Max Liebermann	72	22
11	Othon Friesz	71	19
12	Pierre Guerin	71	19
13	Edouard Manet	71	19
14	Lovis Corinth	69	18
15	Kees van Dongen	68	19
16	Edvard Munch	67	25
53	Anders Zorn	35	15

Comparative list of frequency of exhibitions based on exhibition catalogues recorded by Donald E. Gordon in *Modern Art Exhibitions 1900-1916*

multiple exhibitions during the 1890s and others for which there may not have been a catalogue. The next Nordic artist in the ranking is Anders Zorn, at 56th. Munch's standing among these most frequent exhibitors is all the more remarkable because many of the artists ahead of him on this list were managed by the leading Parisian commercial galleries, such as the Galerie

Bernheim-Jeune, which placed their stable of artists all over Europe and North America. Munch, by comparison, operated much more as an independent contractor.

Frequency of exhibitions is still a limited way of accounting for Munch's subsequent reputation. After all, during the last quarter of the 19th century many Scandinavian artists experienced international reputations and exhibition histories.



Anders Zorn, for example, was celebrated at the Paris Salon and the Paris Universal Exhibition and even had a significant number of exhibitions after 1900. As a portrait artist, Zorn rubbed shoulders with the social and

economic elites of the era. Traveling to America, Zorn painted Presidents along with members of society, fellow artists, and collectors. Nonetheless, Zorn's art failed to exert a lasting resonance in the modernist art historical narrative.

Zorn belonged in fact to a generation of artists—I think of them as the generation of 1900—who were eclipsed by the rise of international modernism and the avant-gardes just as their careers and their art had reached full maturity. One can find such artists in every Western country from this era. As the years passed and as art history made its judgments, artists belonging to the generation of 1900 largely faded from public view outside their respective countries. Often, like Zorn, if their work received any attention at all, critics, especially modernist critics, treated their art as old-fashioned or even overtly commercial. Essentially Munch was alone among Nordic artists born before the 1870s to not share this fate.

How then to explain the differing arcs of these artistic reputations? While art historians habitually give complex answers to such questions, I would argue that within the world of modernist discourse there is a simple narrative: the difference lies in the perception of artistic innovation, which is an extremely powerful concept.

We need to use the word "innovation" carefully. Innovation is easily confused with older terms like originality and invention. An artistic innovation is not an invention nor necessarily something that is original, but rather rests in the subsequent reception of these creative acts or ideas. In almost any

monograph on a Western artist, especially those working since 1800, art historians have come to habitually use the innovation argument to establish the value of an artwork or artist for our attention. Reinhold Heller, for example, in a recent essay on Munch and the German Expressionists, illustrates my point precisely when he writes "Without Edvard Munch, German Expressionism would not have existed. Certainly, it would have been totally different. Conversely, without the experience of Germany, Munch would have developed fundamentally differently had he not interacted with Expressionism there and simultaneously impacted it. He would have remained an artist of major importance within the limited milieu of Norwegian art, but with little or no international recognition or impact."

I believe that what Dr. Heller expresses here is both absolutely true in this example, but also completely typical of canonical writing within our discipline. While we might question whether German Expressionism would have come into being without Munch, there is no question that the perception that Munch inspired and was inspired by German Expressionism is precisely what has raised him to enduring international recognition. Who Munch is tied to is as telling as the claims made about the ties.

Innovators require followers. The German Expressionists appear to satisfy that criterion. But how we might still ask was Munch able to position himself to be the one Nordic artist of this era to have such an impact? It began with what George Kubler once described as the importance of a favorable entry. Munch started out in the right place, or rather, in the right

places, for he was perhaps unique in this period for managing a double entry at nearly the same time: in Berlin (and, more largely, in Germany) and in Paris. At best, most artists of the period parlayed success in Paris at such venues as the Universal Exhibitions into subsequent successes at home or in other countries. Not so Munch, for whom state-sponsored shows mattered little.

Second, it is important that during Munch's early career the artist traveled extensively and used these travels to establish an international network of prestigious art and literary world relationships. Munch could do this because he possessed adequate if not fluent French and even better command of German. He could connect to local cultures in a way that many less multi-lingual artists could not. In this context, I always think of

Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Double Portrait with his wife, Ida*, 1891

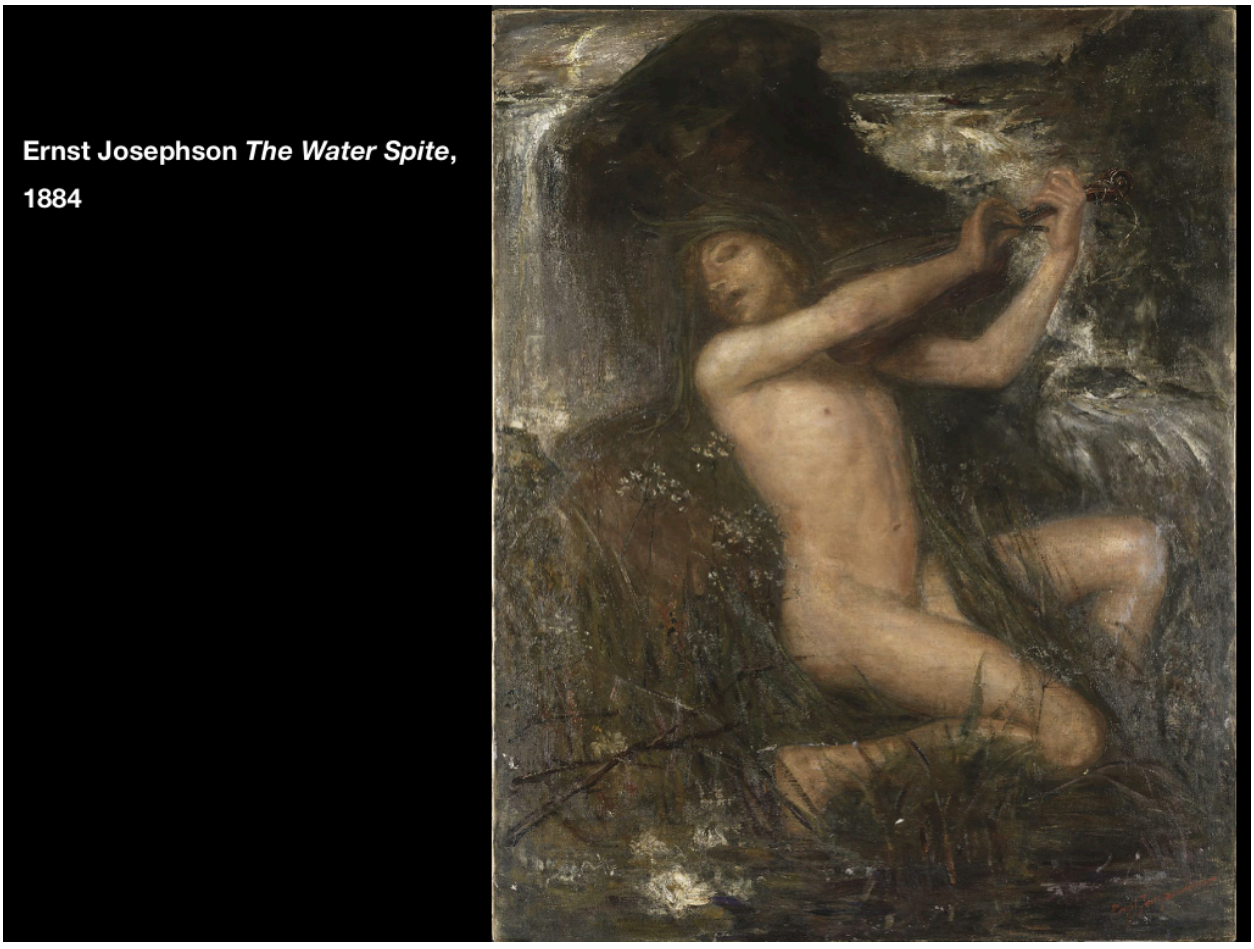
poor Vilhelm Hammershøi, who traveled to Paris in 1892 in the hopes of getting dealer representation with the Galerie Durand-Ruel, but who came equipped with barely a word of French. Not only were his efforts to gain prestigious representation in Paris a failure, it may also have contributed to Hammershøi's alienation from what was going on in Paris among younger modernist artists whose exhibitions he attended. Notably he rejected a show consisting of Maurice Denis and other artists from the Nabis circle as "rubbish".

Birth dates of some leading Nordic artists

Fritz Thaulow b. 1847
Michael Ancher b. 1849
Gerhard Munthe b. 1849
August Strindberg b. 1849
Viggo Johansen b. 1851
Ernst Josephson b. 1851
Peder Severin Krøyer b. 1851
Christian Krohg b. 1852
Carl Larsson b. 1853
Laurits Tuxen b. 1853
Laurits Ring b. 1854
Albert Edelfelt b. 1854
Erik Werenskiold b. 1855
Richard Bergh b. 1858
Anna Ancher b. 1859
Oscar Björck b. 1860
Oda Krohg b. 1860
Anders Zorn b. 1860
Elin Danielson-Gambogi b. 1861
Helene Schjerfbeck b. 1862
Eero Jarnefelt b. 1863
Edvard Munch b. 1863
Vilhelm Hammershøi b. 1864
Prins Eugen b. 1865
Akseli Gallen-Kallela b. 1865
Harald Sohlberg b. 1869
Ellen Thesleff b. 1869
Hugo Simberg b. 1873
Carl Milles b. 1875

Third, Munch benefited from beginning his career at the right time. He belonged to the generation of the 1860s, whose art matured in the years after the great outburst in Paris of what we now call Postimpressionism during the

second half of the 1880s, the leading expression of a pan-European anti-naturalist tendency in both the visual arts and literature. By comparison, artists born just a decade before, which includes many of the most famous names in late 19th-century Nordic art, were wedded to naturalism (an aesthetic increasingly tied to various strands of Nordic nationalism), from which none would significantly break free. Whereas for artists born 1860 and after, pictorial naturalism was a choice, not a key marker of professional accomplishment.



Consider the case of Ernst Josephson, born in 1851. Undoubtedly more troubled in psyche than Munch, Josephson lacked the aesthetic

vocabulary to translate his personal visions into something that would be psychologically resonant with his audiences. Josephson broke free from his own naturalist vocabulary in his series on the *Water Sprite,* mostly dating from the early 1880s, only to meet rejection and incomprehension by his fellow artists. Munch of course experienced similar vicissitudes, but with very different results. The *Water Sprite* series came at a time when Josephson was struggling to establish his position in the official art world at home and abroad through conventional means, such as exhibiting at the Paris Salon and participating in the reformation of the art institutions of his native Sweden. In this, the visionary Josephson was profoundly at odds with the professional Josephson.

By the time younger Nordic artists began to take an interest in his anti-naturalist works, Josephson was fully in the grips of schizophrenia. His art had evolved relatively little over time. Josephson fell further and further out of touch with the major tendencies of international modernism. He simply was unable to grow and adapt with the latest tendencies in contemporary art.

This leads me to a fourth factor that played I believe a very significant role in the early perception of Munch as an artistic innovator, which was his ability to exploit a fundamental transformation in the late 19th-century European art world, having to do with the changing character of artistic professionalism.

Whereas Josephson struggled to reconcile a visionary art to his professional practice, Munch was able to link practice and profession

together. Munch responded to the profound change in professional artistic identity that was reshaping the European art market—just as conversely, the market was reshaping what constituted the professional behavior of modern artists. I will describe this as a shift from liberal professionalism in the art world to a bohemian model of professional identity and practices. And it is to this phenomenon that I will devote the rest of this talk.

Henri Gervex (1852–1929), *A Session of the Painting Jury*, c. 1884-85

The generation of 1900 were liberal professionals; their primary institutional goal was the overthrow of the hegemony of the respective academies and related institutions in their native countries. In so doing, these artists generally advocated for artistic freedom of expression and for the

importance of individuality; in other words, they tended to promote inclusivity rather than exclusivity in their understanding of art.

We can see something of the aspirations of the liberal artist professional embodied in this painting of a Salon jury by another member of the generation of 1900, the French painter Henri Gervex. This self-definition was based on the mid-19th-century professionalization of other disciplines, such as law, medicine and science. For these disciplines professionalization came to represent by this time 1) the standardization of expertise through a review of one's peers and the subsequent granting of degrees (official certification of expertise and quality of work), 2) the independence of the profession from outside forces such as the state and state-sponsored institutions (professionalism as a form of self-governance, shared values, standards and competencies), 3) the establishment of professional associations (like our AMA or legal bar associations), and 4) the subsequent monopoly of those certified as the exclusive, legitimate practitioners within the field. When the generation of 1900 set up their own exhibition societies they absorbed many of the practices and expectations of the other professions. And central to all their activities was the expectation of self-governance, which one sees in all manner of exhibition societies that spread across Europe during the 1880s. This institutional phenomenon achieved maturity in the pan-European Secessionist movement of the late 1890s and early 20th century.

In their art, the generation of 1900 often made their professional aspirations as artists appear to be a direct extension of their personal lives.

Indeed, publicly trading on their private lives sometimes became the central stuff of their art. In the process, these artists continually intermixed representations of professional competencies with scenes of apparent personal domestic harmony.

Many artists frequently made a great show of their and their friends' studios, as a sign of their professional practice. And because, these studio scenes were often populated with undressed female models, they possessed a slightly transgressive, yet fashionably risqué quality. Similarly, in their self-representations, male artists belonging to the generation of 1900 often engaged in an excessive masculinity in their imagery, as, for example, one

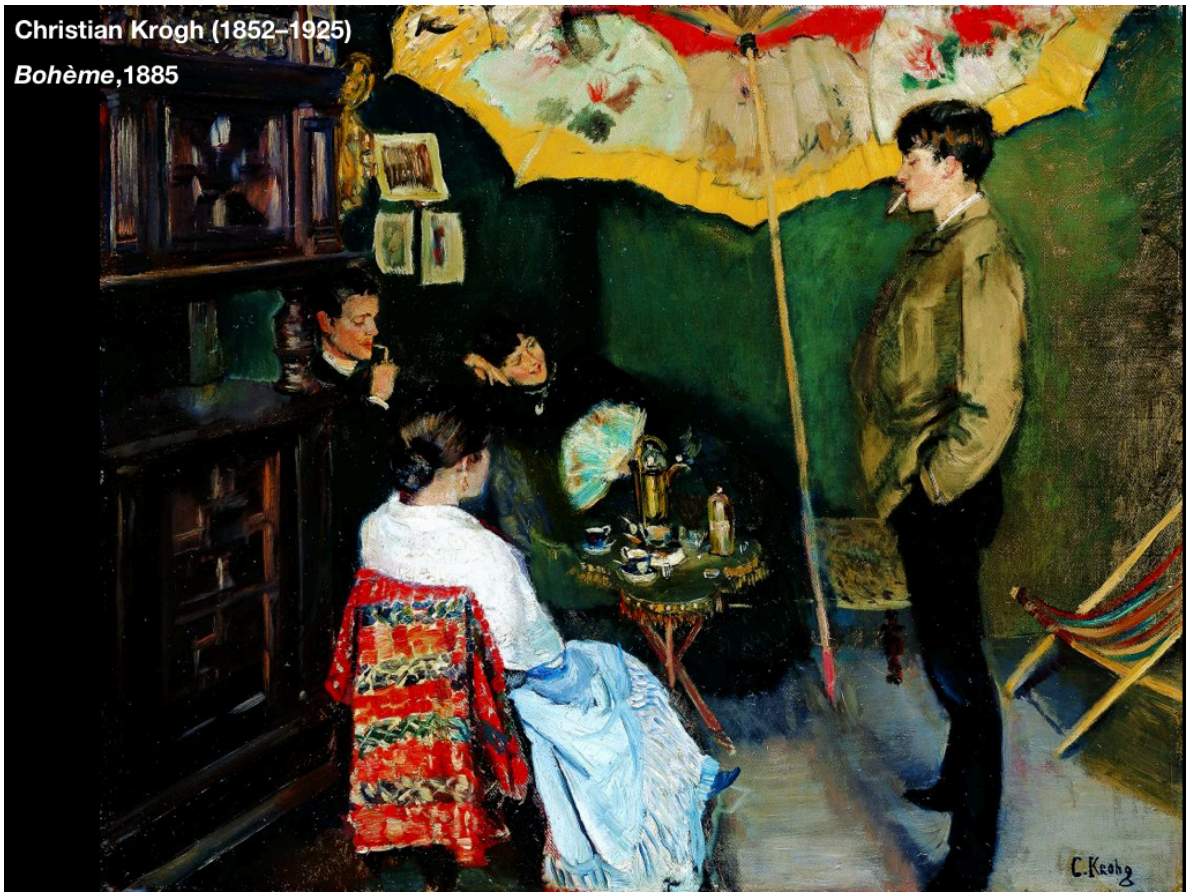
Anders Zorn, *In Wikström's Studio*, 1889

Carl Larsson *Self-Portrait (In the new studio)*, 1912

often sees in Zorn's work, but even in the works of that most treasured image-maker of domesticity, Carl Larsson. It was as if these artists were anxious to promote marital relationships in their work as a counter-balance, as an effort to normalize the exoticness and sexuality so often promoted in their studio imagery.

As the generation of 1900 abandoned the mass marketplace of the official exhibition venues for the smaller artist-run Salons, they entered an altogether different competitive arena, with unintended consequences. Pierre Bourdieu once described these two markets as two different fields of cultural production. He wrote: "In contrast to the field of large-scale cultural

production, which submits to the laws of competition for the conquest of the largest possible market, the field of restricted production tends to develop its own criteria for the evaluation of its products, thus achieving the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors." This is a complicated way of saying that there developed first in Paris and then elsewhere in Europe an alternative model of professional practice not geared toward the large audiences of the Salon, and other large public venues, but rather to a much smaller audience of collectors and fellow artists. And within this restricted market, artists began developing their own criteria for evaluating their art, as well as altering standards for professional behavior.



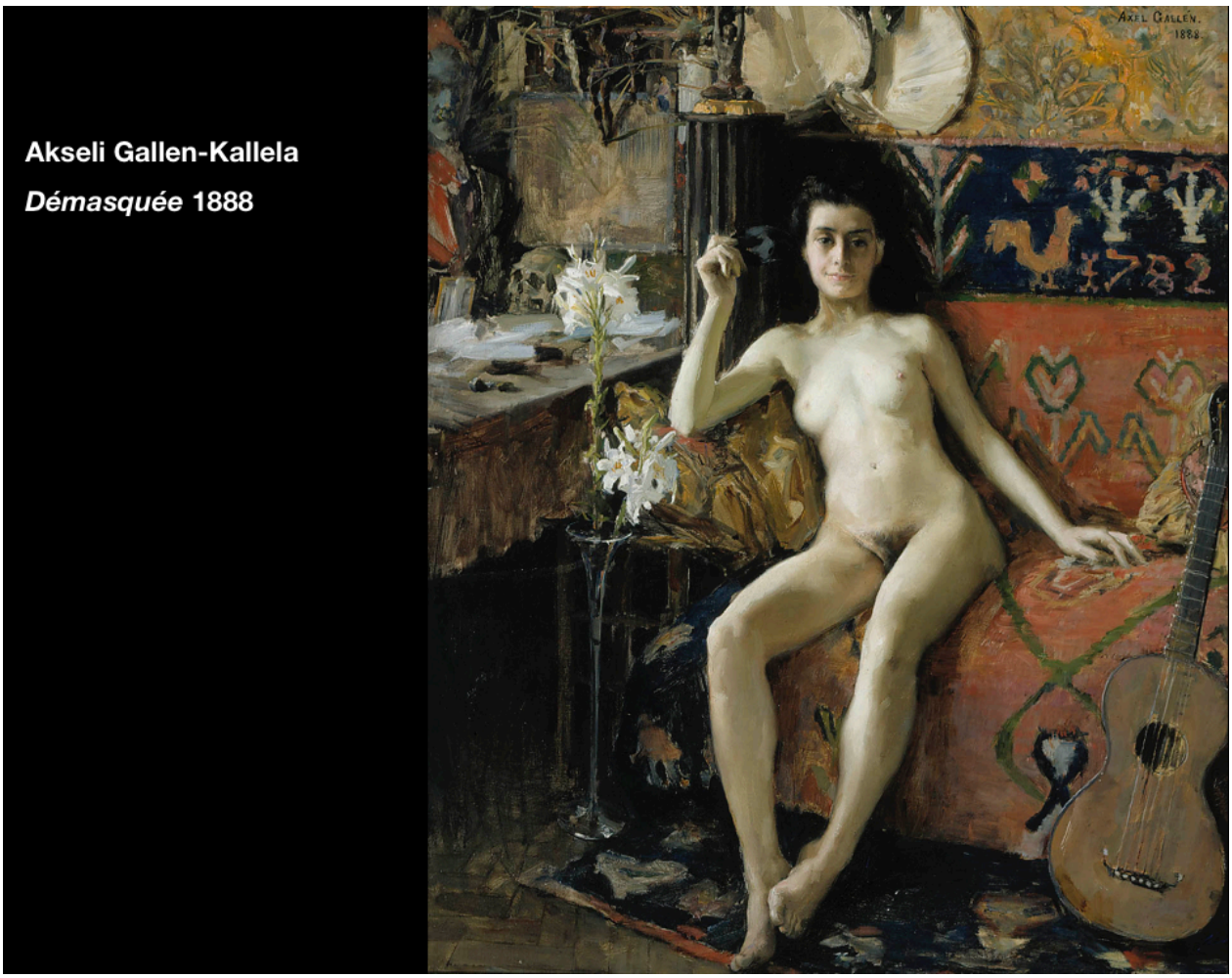
This is where I believe the idea of an artistic bohemia begins to play a critical market role. For my purposes, bohemia is a more useful trope than modernism because it describes an imaginary geography, situated outside the world of the publicly certified professional artist, and outside societal norms, but not inherently walled off from either. Unlike modernism, artistic bohemia was not circumscribed by style nor by nationality nor by class. Bound by personal relationships rather than by institutions, the artist bohemians sought recognition within an intellectual marketplace for ideas against the grain of publicly valued art and publicly valued art institutions, and before both commercial and popular recognition. Competing as much with each other as with older artistic forms of expression and artist institutions, the bohemian artist willed change.

The idea of bohemia had a specific currency in Scandinavia during the 1880s, but this Nordic version of bohemia belonged more properly to the liberal professional artist than to artists like Munch. Christian Krohg's depiction of bohemia, a group of friends gathered casually in a room with a somewhat exotic (and cheap) decor, includes a portrait of Munch lighting a cigarette in the corner. How much Krohg himself identified with the young people he paints in *Bohème* is unclear. But for Krohg bohemia was clearly understood to belong to the forces for social change. As you know, in addition to his naturalist paintings, Krohg found a progressive art journal, wrote for newspapers, and published several naturalist novels. Later he took up long-term residence in Paris (1901-1909) where he taught at the Académie

Colarossi—that famous entry point for international artists moving to Paris—which became a key institutional contributor to the formation of the School of Paris. And Krohg ended his career as director of the Norwegian art academy. This is precisely the kind of career path charted by most of the generation of 1900, by the liberal professionals I have been describing.

Whatever Krohg's own intentions were for painting *Bohème*, the picture underlines the importance of intimate group affiliation and the shelter offered by personal relationships that could be walled off from the larger professional world of the artist, the world that Krohg himself relentlessly pursued. The bohemian's self-fashioning as a social outsider discovered an easy alliance with the notion that artistic importance was to be established through innovation and the overthrow of inherited standards. Compared to the liberalism of the 19th-century artist professional, bohemians were often illiberal. They could be absolutist in insisting on the primacy of their art; they were often highly intolerant of other artistic positions, and especially of the art of the generations that immediately preceded them. And they were intentionally provocative.

It was no doubt a self-created fiction that bohemia could exist outside of class, outside of money, and outside of social constraints, that it could be a privileged place in which to discover personal and artistic freedom. Gallen-Kallela's *Unmasked* is the work very much of a 23-year-old expatriate artist reveling in Paris—before marriage, before children, before official recognition. This bohemian imaginary did offer the indiscriminate mixture of social



classes, but not their disintegration. Similarly, while bohemia claimed to offer liberation from contemporary social mores and social spaces, like the artist's studio, in practice bohemia was just as bound by sexual politics as it was by class politics. Bohemia was and is a social construct as much as liberal professionalism.

The rewards of the bohemian imaginary that triumphed during the 1880s in Paris, and adapted by Munch in the 1890s, were indeterminate; bohemia offered no career promises except a largely unexamined faith in the future validation of its innovators. There were no medals nor professorships;

artistic aspiration was achieved through rejection, not imitation. Whereas the Salon professional subscribed to a life cycle of upward mobility, bohemianism unsettled class identities. For many, bohemianism bred distrust through its upsetting of social norms and because of its internally-driven aesthetic and social standards.

Where liberally-minded professional bodies erected strong regional or national barriers along with their standards in an attempt to regulate competition, bohemia imagined an environment where cultures and classes could freely mix by virtue of a common rootlessness. Indeed, expatriation and internationalism are the most powerful manifestations of bohemia. The geography of bohemia was quintessentially urban; even the pastoral artist colonies of this era derived the logic of their existence from urban bohemia.

In the commercial gallery world that Munch's art came to inhabit, universal professional standards did not apply. Here the judgement of a few was far more important than the opinions of the many. Here self-identification was essential in generating the trust necessary for the valuation of the artist and artwork. This was also an exclusionary world in which any artwork or artist not fully adhering to the new aesthetic innovations were readily described as reactionary—modernist artists and their adherents dismissed what they didn't like as at best commercial, at worst kitsch. The generation of 1900 fell generally to their critique. The chicness of Zorn's work in the 1890s became crass in the early 20th century.

The replacement of the professional Salon artist by the bohemian artist

professional did not, of course, happen all at once. Its roots are early in the 19th century. But the point when it becomes the discourse through which innovative art gets institutionalized may properly belong to the end of the 19th century, to the period during which Munch's art matured. This is not a phenomenon that can be explained away by the intervention of dealers—we know that even before the Impressionist market had matured, the Salon system had already lost its hold over many emerging artists of the 1880s generation. The bohemian imaginary wells up within the artist community.

I would like at this juncture to return to that interesting moment in Munch's biography where we can see the artist make the transition from liberal professional to artistic bohemian. Forgive me if this has already been noted in the Munch literature, but in preparing this talk I was struck by the photograph we have of Munch's sensational, career-launching exhibition at

the Equitable Palace in Berlin in the winter of 1892-93. For the date, by contemporary Parisian art standards Munch's show would appear to have been a comparatively tame exhibition—so much so that we might marvel how it caused such an uproar. The dominant painting, simply by size, in Munch's show was *Spring* dating from 1889.

Munch, *Spring*, 1889

Also in the exhibition was the Impressionist-inspired view of the Rue Lafayette in Paris.

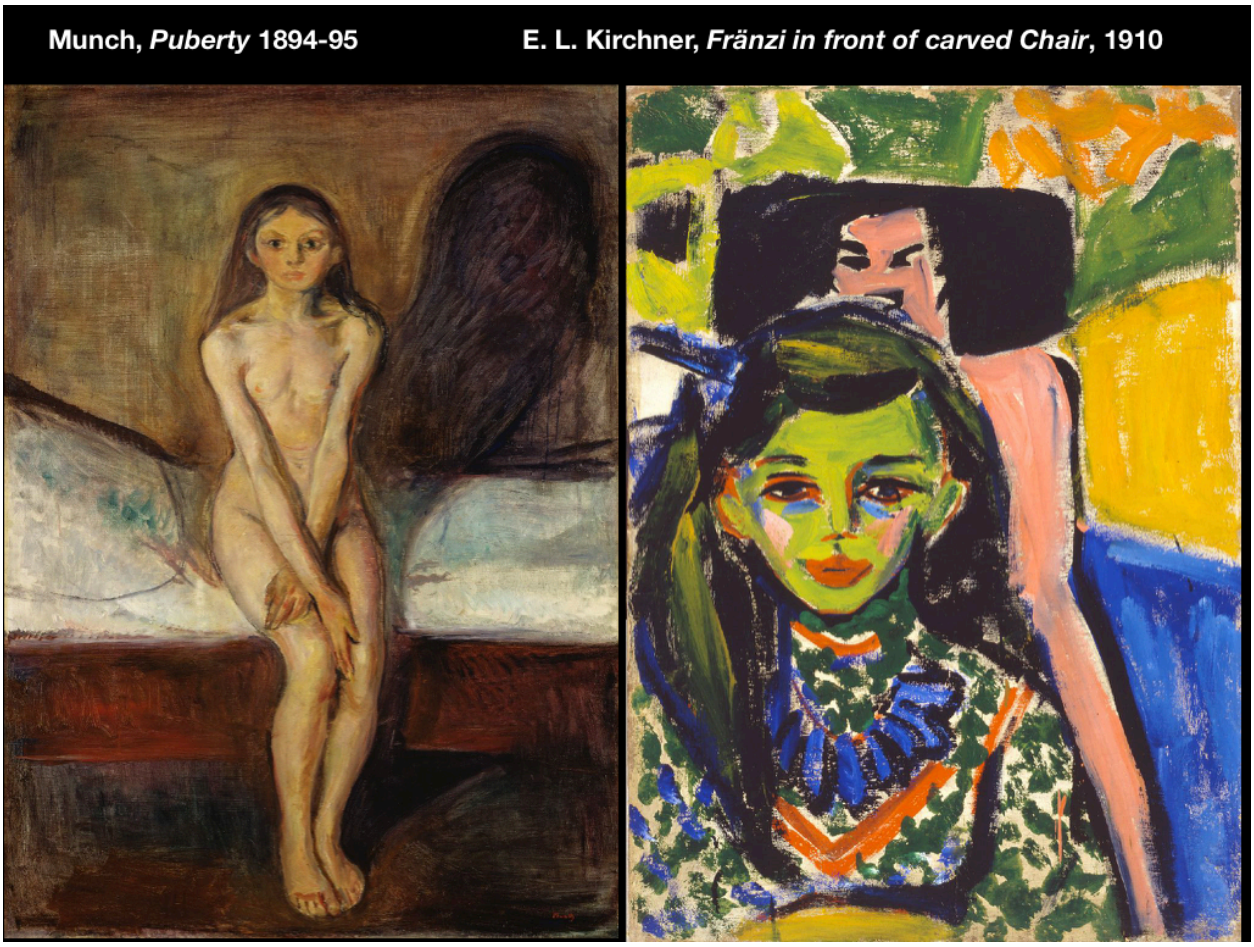
What explains the scandal more than any other single factor is that except in very small circles, there existed at best only a vague awareness of French Impressionism in Germany. Without context, Munch's exhibition

showcased some of the radical changes offered up by French art over the prior two decades. But at this juncture Munch was not far off-center from his Nordic liberal professional contemporaries.

For me, the most interesting picture visible in this photograph is that of a woman lying in bed, her arm falling to the floor with a still life adjacent to her, a painting the artist reworked in 1895 as *The Day After.* Munch's response to controversy, clearly, was very different than Josephson's had been a decade earlier. Instead of evading controversy, Munch embraced it. He aggressively pursued formal techniques and subject matter—like *The Day After*—that could only have been intended to shock, translating an earlier idea into an extreme statement, a strategy he consistently took in the years immediately following the Berlin show.

I might be mistaken, but I'm not sure that until the Berlin show it had occurred to Munch to self-consciously take on the mantle of an anti-naturalist, post-Impressionist position. While he was certainly aware of the most radical trends in French Postimpressionism, he did not immediately adopt them. It was only after the Berlin scandal that Munch's art acquired a sudden maturation. And in doing so, Munch built a radical form of artistic expression on the bedrock of the social and private concerns that characterized the Nordic liberal professionals of the prior generation. This is why Munch is such a transitional figure. And it was because of the timeliness of Munch's emergence that he was also able to employ the right message,

adroitly combining the radical aesthetic freedom of Parisian Postimpressionism with the more literary sensibilities of the 1890s symbolists. In many ways, Munch's amalgamation of these two trends was more legible, more consumable, and more translatable than either aesthetic separately.



Another way that Munch is a transitional figure is the artist's almost literary identification of personal trauma and psychic distress with the images he made. It is important to note that the German Die Brücke, with whom Munch is most associated, disassociated their radical approach to technique and color—at least prior to the war years—from the subject matter of their art.

However outrageous their paintings, prints and sculptures may have appeared to audiences at the time this outrageousness at best only cryptically related to the artists who made the works.

Munch, on the other hand, turned the autobiographical language of the liberal professionals against itself. He replaced these older positive images of domesticity with images of failure and abjection. There are no happy relationships between men and women, no images of domestic bliss. And where Zorn and others reveled in aggressive masculinity, Munch frequently portrayed women as predatory and men as hunted. Even the studio image

was largely supplanted in Munch's art by the street or the bedroom. And the depiction of the Nordic landscape embraced by the liberal professionals, Munch treated as a threat and a hallucination. I find the self-consciousness with which Munch reworked the prior generation's vocabulary extraordinary.

The victory of the bohemians like Munch over the liberal professionals came at the personal cost to the reputations and fortunes of these older artists. And the gains made for the professional status of the artist were also lost. Whereas other professions were validated and supported by a mass system of cultural production, when bohemian artists took over they were sustained by a small coterie of collectors, fellow artists, critics and dealers serving an intimate, yet still anonymous marketplace—that is to say, no safety nets or institutional supporting mechanisms and no clear trajectories toward public recognition.

The disruption of liberal professionalism by the market and by bohemia led to the fracturing of authority—how did one now know what was valuable and what wasn't? The larger public continued for a long time to assume the professional authority of the large public exhibitions or the smaller shows of the Secessions; but a handful of collectors—and that's all it takes—began to select a variety of artists and artistic expressions to patronize explicitly on the grounds of innovation. I have often wondered how the artists who had the misfortune of reaching maturity around 1900 while still oriented to the publicly-held values of the old Salon system must have privately felt about what was happening to their profession.

One final consequence of the triumph of the bohemian art professional was the more or less permanent establishment of the notion of art as a form of cultural alienation. Even when unintended, ideas such as artistic authenticity came to assume a corresponding lack of financial success—and therefore an essential un-relatedness to market considerations—except, of course, posthumously, when an important artist's work would then be subjected to rampant speculation.

Nonetheless, "outsider", bohemian artists, whether they chose to embrace the market or to reject it, no more escaped the marketplace than did their older liberal professional rivals who bohemia might consider commercial. The market affected not only the bohemian artists' material fortunes, but also how such artists worked and how they presented their art to the public. It is difficult to find artists from bohemia who were not profoundly aware of market considerations or an important artist who failed to self-consciously position his or her work (which includes how and what the artist made), that is to behave as a professional, in relation to their market.

The bohemian's open disdain of the pursuit of money and honors was often accompanied by arguments regarding the essential spiritual, expressive, or psychological values of art against the rampant materialism of fin-de-siècle Western culture. It is an example of what Bruno Latour has described as the capacity of the moderns to speak with a forked tongue, that is to say, to espouse in theory one view while in practice behaving in an entirely different manner. This of course is what an artist like Vasily Kandinsky did during the

years leading up to the First World War. He may have advocated the importance of an art that communicated through spiritual vibrations and that was effectively anti- materialist in orientation. Yet no European artist pursued exhibition opportunities more intensively than Kandinsky did nor self-promoted more inventively than he. Munch, I believe, is closer to Kandinsky than many perhaps realize. There is a similar disjunction between the messages his art conveys and his exploits in the European art market of the period. Both artists can be taken as paragons of the new bohemian professional born out of the ashes of the liberal professional.

The victory of Munch in the marketplace of innovation and hence his canonical stature could therefore be considered a pyrrhic victory, where many of the social aspirations of the generation of 1900 were consumed in the name of the name of the bohemian imaginary.